

OPENING STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE VERNON EHLERS
CHAIRMAN
COMMITTEE ON HOUSE ADMINISTRATION
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Joint hearing with the Committee on Science:

Voting Machines: Will the New Standards and Guidelines Help Prevent Future Problems?

Wednesday, July 19, 2006

2:00 - 4:00 p.m.

2318 Rayburn

Good afternoon. I want to welcome everyone to this joint hearing of the Committees on Science and House Administration to review the development and implementation of the Voluntary Voting Systems Guidelines (VVSG).

My main objective in holding this hearing is to discuss how voting technology standards can help us come closer to two very important goals: First – that every citizen knows that their vote is being accurately counted, and second – that every citizen knows that their vote is not being diluted by illegal or improper votes. At this hearing, I look forward to hearing from expert witnesses whose testimony may help us understand how voting equipment standards and testing can help improve the accuracy and security of the country's voting systems, and prevent errors and fraud.

The new Voluntary Voting System Guidelines were developed pursuant to the requirements of the Help America Vote Act of 2002, or HAVA, and it was the Science Committee and House Administration Committee that wrote the language requiring these federal technical guidelines.

Under HAVA, draft technical standards for voting systems are developed by the Technical Guidelines Development Committee (TGDC), a 14-member panel chaired by the Director of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). The TGDC recommends standards to the Election Assistance Commission (EAC), which approves the voluntary standards after review and input from a HAVA-established Standards Board and a Board of Advisors composed of federal, state and local election officials.

The first set of standards under HAVA (known as the Voluntary Voting Systems Guidelines (VVSG)) were approved by the EAC in December 2005, although their official effective date was delayed until December 2007.

The creation of the 2005 Voluntary Voting Systems Guidelines was an important step in improving voting standards, but the utility of the guidelines in ensuring honest and fair elections will only be demonstrated by their adoption and implementation in the states. Also, NIST still needs to approve test protocols at companies that will certify that voting systems meet the guidelines. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses how the guidelines will be used by states in the selection and use of voting equipment, and when we can expect NIST to complete certification of the testing companies. Our hearing today should give us a better understanding of our progress in applying these standards, as well as the efforts underway to facilitate their adoption.

Another important issue with regard to voting standards is the ability to update the guidelines as circumstances change and technologies evolve. In the event that the guidelines are updated, some existing equipment may fall out of compliance with the updated regulations. We need to understand what impact these updates will have on equipment already in use, and what guidance the EAC will offer the states in assessing this impact and helping them deal with it.

The matters we will discuss today are technical in nature and, while they may be complicated, the underlying question is a simple one – how will the new standards improve the integrity and accuracy of our voting systems? As the name suggests, the Help America Vote Act was enacted to help our citizens exercise their right to vote. Technology can help us advance that goal, but it must be deployed with the proper standards – standards that take into account the human factors that will determine whether or not real people – voters - will be able to use the technology with ease and confidence. Our objective is to ensure that every person who is eligible to vote is able to do so, with the assurance that their vote will be accurately counted, and that their vote will not be nullified by fraud.

I would like to thank our witnesses for offering their insight into these issues, as we continue to improve our voting systems and processes on behalf of all Americans.